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ABSTRACT

The argument at the heart of this paper is a struggle over the construction of the feminist composition teacher. There are traces of her construction in countless unrecorded verbal exchanges; every reference to student fears of professors, to "sensitive" men, to maternal women, to sensible feminists is such a trace. Generally speaking, publications testifying to the existence of this struggle tend toward one of two modes. One popular mode is the autobiographical account that records institutional and personal conflicts and enacts a so-called strategic essentialism. A second mode representing the struggle over the construction of the feminist compositionist may speak in the first person without being autobiographical. It takes a more traditionally scholarly approach, sometimes laced with accusation. The point is not to valorize the first mode of feminist self-critique and demonize the second. As soon as any division is made, overlapping features leap to the surface; every struggle over the category of Woman seems to include some gratitude, some sarcasm, some idealization, some frustration. Expressing dissatisfaction with feminist research has been a rhetorical dilemma for feminists convinced that oneupmanship, the agonistic protocol for scholarship, needs pacifying. It is possible that the recent celebration of feminist collaboration serves to make dissent appear less antagonistic. Where two or more feminists cooperate in their criticism of, for example, maternal metaphors, their dispute is with feminism, not against it. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

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Negotiating Gender Knowledge
Mary Sullivan
March 23, 1995
Washington, DC CCCC

This paper was supposed to tell a story of Frost, Looser and Sullivan, and use my experience of our collaborations to account for some of the ways in which writers produce gender knowledge collaboratively. I have wanted to articulate a concept of gender knowledge to name an effect which feminism has had on the discourse of the university, specifically that of the writing classroom. I am not suggesting that feminism is a source, in any originary sense, of gender knowledge, although it is both a historical phenomenon and an analytic disposition. I do believe that gender talk tends to circulate around the figure of the feminist, a specter, a body, a text, a peer, a superior, a subordinate - always a presence. This essay begins its observations not as a story of three figures of Woman, but as a story of "ughs." U-G-H. When you utter "ugh" you can feel your face grow taut with a grimace; you may be wincing in disgust, as if recoiling from pain, but at the same time you are asserting your critical energy. An "ugh" exclaimed in the public spaces of our work seeks response. In the company of another person who reads for a living it asks for a coreader: are you, too, horrified and disgusted by this assumption? that turn of events? this distortion of meanings? I have smiled at a number of ughs in the margins of xeroxed articles sent by Devoney. Clare and I have cringed at the stereotypical direction of our observations of Asian student texts. We wanted to complicate gender and ran smack into a reproduction of what Sau Ling Cynthia Wong calls the effeminate Asian man and the hyperfeminine Asian woman. The work of composition, done by student and scholar alike,

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is to transform the ughs and the oohs and the aahs of critical perception and felt sense into intelligible discourse. Since the most basic definition of collaboration encompasses all the texts which a writer reads, I knew I had legitimate reasons for mentioning the semiotic utterance "ugh." Not only do the fields of linguistics and psychoanalysis validate an investigation of such embodied elements of speech, it is a way to avoid the problematics of metaphor. Besides, Rebecca Pope in the Tulsa Studies dialogue discussed by Devoney begins by saying: "A collaborative paper on collaboration. Ugh." Her reluctance is translated by Susan Leonardi as a horror of perpetual self-reflexivity, an echo of which you may hear today.

So, have you started to think about your proposal for the next 4cs? Abstracts will be due at the end of April. Here we are at session A, the dawn of a conference, still fresh, and I am nagging you. Actually, I have a few reasons for beginning with that question. One is to have elicited a silent "ugh" from you. Perhaps you simply rolled your eyes or gave me a courtesy smile. You may have grimaced at the thought of one more deadline, or you may have yawned at the banality of my text which calls attention to itself. A conference paper about conference papers may be even more annoying than novels about novelists. (However, we in composition do give lip service to these forums as examples of our own collaborative workshopping, our chance for peer feedback.) I admit that my evidence of any such annoyance with professional anecdotes is itself anecdotal. With some of my peers, in feminist research especially, I have been tempted to call a moratorium on the diary entry qua academic article. Maybe this is because their plots have become almost embarrassingly familiar. A protagonist discovers her latent prejudices and repents in the name of

sisterhood; a marginal figure confounds the elders and finally gets tenure. Perhaps our mocking chatter is a kind of affectionate envy, for we take pleasure in such shop talk stories, but our versions are not yet published.

When Devoney Looser and I last spoke face to face about our project, we played with a disclaimer of sorts. We performed our hypothetical opening line on a lobby bench in San Diego. "In this presentation" we pontificated, "you will hear no details about where we slept, what we ate, whose music we listened to, or how many times we interrupted our work to go to the bathroom." You see, at that point in our collaborative project on the relation of feminism and collaboration in composition, we were struggling with the "so what" of our research. We didn't want to waste time on our personal voices. Never mind whose subjectivity was being deconstructed, what was our object? Was it to expose some dangerous assumptions about feminist practice in composition? Dangerous for whom? For student writers who might fail to master the art of argumentation? Who might end a course confirmed in their beliefs that women are more naturally nurturing and compromising than men? Dangerous for the cohesion of a theoretically oriented feminism which works against categorical definitions of femininity and masculinity? Dangerous because such assumptions strip feminism of its dangerous potential?

When I write in my compositionist's voice, I watch the figure of the student surface and submerge. The genre demands case studies and as Clare and I began our idiosyncratic sampling of Asian American writing and realized how much more we needed to know about using qualitative data, we also wrote a hypothetical disclaimer: "Any resemblance to social science is accidental." I am reminded of Richard Miller's criticism of that disciplinary

history writing which reifies the gulf between literature and composition, theory and practice. He asks us to consider how arguments between professors "have effected the work expected of those on the other side of the lectern" (165). The professorial argument at the heart of this paper is, in its simplest form, a struggle over the construction of the feminist composition teacher. There are traces of her construction in countless unrecorded verbal exchanges; every reference to student fear of professors, to "sensitive" men, to maternal women, to sensible feminists is such a trace.

Generally speaking, publications testifying to the existence of this struggle tend toward one of two modes. One popular mode is the autobiographical account which records institutional and personal conflicts and enacts a so-called strategic essentialism. As Nancy Miller says of the current turn toward "confessional criticism," 'Who isn't doing it?' I would insist that these pieces are more complex in their rhetoric and construction of identities than my earlier dismissal of anecdote may have suggested. Lori Goodman Batson's personal voice in "Defining Ourselves as Woman (in the Profession) is typical. She "collaborates"- in the knowledge-making sense- with Helene Cixous and Margaret Atwood, writing: "By attempting to codify ecriture feminine, turning it into a pedagogy . . . We paint a picture of Woman which hangs easily in the academy. . . Why do we not laugh with Cixous- 'Let's get out of here' . . . I see danger in the critical eyes of the women around me, watching for the appropriate woman like writing." At the same time Batson is wary of the category of woman, she avoids collaboration in the political sense- as in the French Occupation or the phrase "patriarchal collaborator. She insists that the danger is not that women will not be taken seriously, but that their work will be "rendered harmless to the

assumptions they would question." The connotation of collaboration as potentially traitorous and corrupt makes sense when an enemy has been identified. A common feature in discussions of feminist pedagogy is how to negotiate the assumption that men are the enemy. Constructing enemies is one of the surest ways to harness language in binary oppositions, a familiar rhetorical obsession these days.

A second mode representing the struggle over the construction of the feminist compositionist may speak in the first person without being autobiographical. It takes a more traditionally scholarly approach, sometimes laced with accusation. I cannot resist mentioning Christina Hoff Sommers' subtitle to Who Stole Feminism because her subtitle- How women have betrayed women so aptly describes the mood of much gender writing. Sommers writes of a composition teacher who refuses to provide "model" essays and espouses an adversarial view of pedagogy. Sommers argues: "It simply never occurs to [the professor] that her own attitude toward Minnie [a working class Puerto Rican] is disrespectful, and that it is she who has been taught by her feminist mentors to adopt a patronizing posture toward women like Minnie." (102). Sommers appears to be taking Richard Miller's question seriously, nobly putting the interests of the students center stage, yet she has decontextualized Minnie's dashed expectations for a writing course from the larger field of composition. She blames only a chain of feminist influence.

My point here is not to valorize my first mode of feminist self-critique and demonize the second. As soon as one makes any division, overlapping features leap to the surface; every struggle over the category of Woman seems to include some gratitude, some sarcasm, some idealization, some frustration. Nor is my point to attack Sommers who does consider

herself within both feminism and academia, and whose view of freshman composition's utilitarian function is common enough. However, her analysis exhibits two features worth noting. The first is a foundational belief in the determining power of models. If only Minnie had good essays to read, then she would have become a good writer; if only her professor had not been corrupted by her feminist mentors, she would have more respect for all women. Batson, by using the rigid image of woman's portrait in a gallery represents what I find to be a healthy suspicion of models. A second feature of Sommers' rhetoric is her reliance on the movement within and without, the language of inclusion and exclusion. She neatly places herself within a set of honorable traditions - rigorous Philosophy, standard formal English and old-fashioned, equal opportunity, free will feminism Just like the gender feminists she criticizes, she creates boxes.

Don Kraemer, like Sommers, is also dissatisfied with gender research, although he does not believe that "an overeager research agenda has dominated student texts, constructing gender crimes and fallacies where none exist (324)." He argues that the problem of creating boxes, or "reading what we want to know" is manifest in the presupposition of a "synechdochic model of the gendered writer. In other words, when we fix a writer as a part of a whole, he or she is both equated to the text, and passively contained by the script of that whole. Kraemer focuses on what happens when gender is conceived as a whole, precisely by those most committed to realizing a gender-conscious classroom. He calls the resulting pedagogical model perverse: students "are transformed from gender dupes into self-aware academics... At first they were blind, now they see that the whole of gender absorbs and exhausts their texts (329-30)." While a significant body

of gender research points to ethnicity as a locus for further research, as Clare and I did with Linda Peterson's work, Kraemer works against the desire to create more boxes, to find more heterogenous samples for the sake of new taxonomies. If we take seriously his reversal of the question about how gender affects our use of language, asking instead how "we make intelligible the problem of desirably representing gender," our students will stand a better chance of taking their writing beyond stereotype analysis.

Interestingly, Kraemer's targets are both men and women conducting gender research, and although he uses his imagination of himself as a "virile man and responsible father" as an example of sliding self-representations, he does not have to announce his stake in feminism per se. His commitment to improving composition instruction appears obvious and unassailable. Yet expressing dissatisfaction with feminist research has been a rhetorical dilemma for feminists convinced that oneupmanship, the agonistic protocol for scholarship needs pacifying. How do women criticize feminist assumptions or strategies without creating an us and them, without codifying degrees of feminism which makes one position or person more feminist than another. It occurs to me that the recent celebration of feminist collaboration serves to make dissent appear less antagonistic. In other words, where two or more feminists cooperate in their criticism of, for example, maternal metaphors or "connected knowing" their dispute is with feminism, not against it. I am conscious of setting up another box, a concept of feminist identity and loyalty which contains and constricts individual academic feminists. Yet such a box is the site of that professorial struggle over what it means to mark feminism as an indicator of gender knowledge authority.

Let me make the connection between assumptions about collaboration and the authority of gender knowledge more explicit. If we assume that collaboration names the social dynamic of writing, we turn to its practical implications in the hope of getting beyond the truism that writing is social to an understanding of how writing is socially situated. Women have described their experience in the feminist classroom as places where they must prove the complicated ways in which a) as women they do have professorial authority, b) that their authority is not necessarily maternal, and c) their knowledge of feminism is not only personal experience but genuinely scholarly. They finesse feminism, they negotiate, they distance themselves from the word, mirroring their women students who also understand feminism in relation to their self perception. For men, gender knowledge may also be experiential, but they are more likely to be presented as Don Kraemer relates. He gave his students samples of gender research, thereby authorizing it as scholarship, and then invited students to collaborativly analyze their own narratives according to the gender traits listed. His personification as either a feminist sympathizer or detractor seems irrelevant to his story of teaching. James Reither and Douglas Vipond list three elements of collaboration, of which coauthoring and workshopping "are not essential conditions of scholarship (860)." Realizing that "Knowledge Making" or entering the conversation of an academic field is in fact both necessary and collaborative led them to develop a pedagogy which "provides real audiences who have real need for the writing" and gives students an opportunity to "make meaning out of and with a genuine scholarly field (865)."

Here at a conference we do have real audiences, although their real needs may have less to do with our writing than we would wish. At the start of my presentation I asked you

if Four Cs 1996 had crossed your mind. I wanted to call attention to a leisurely condition for writing which our students rarely have; the hiatus. We write our 4cs abstracts and can lay our papers aside for as long as nine months, We stockpile articles and encounter others sharing our interests, reassuring ourselves of the genuine status of our scholarship. (Meanwhile, our students must get from freewriting through group work to portfolios in 14 weeks.) Collectives who have published their self-reflective collaborations, like the Canadian Feminist Ethics Theory Group or the Feminist Sophistics Pedagogy Group, always mention the enabling presence of grants, mutual trust and seminar time. Mary Belenkey's pajama party metaphor may be another embarrassing analogy, but by colliding its image of leisure and play with the fact of a FIPSE grant, she stresses the necessity of financed time for uninterrupted work.

What Devoney and I share, along with a number of self-conscious feminist critics, is a specific resistance to the maternal metaphors for collaborating. We resist it in part because woman is all too easily reduced to mother, the radical potential of maternal thinking easily coopted. As Susan Miller describes the feminization of composition: " [the teacher] is a nurse who cares for and tempts her young charges toward adult uses of language that will not count because they are for now, engaged only with the hired help." Resistance as both obstinate behavior and praiseworthy historical and political awareness has been a topic of great interest to composition scholars lately. It is a term which vacillates powerfully between negative and positive connotations, depending on the context and ideological positions of the speaker and audience. Consider a writer resisting the conventions of Standard English, resisting what is called "Emancipatory Pedagogy,"[1] or

resisting the ethos of Free Market economics. Resisting collaboration is a tempting option for students in the teacherless classroom, as well as members of a writing program who are expected to cooperate with portfolio and placement assessment. Such resistances some of you may applaud, others deplore. Students may wish to guard their personal narratives especially, refusing to believe that like a research paper, their autobiographies draw upon other social, public texts. Sara Farris believes that her feminism exacerbated the resistance of "the judges, a half-dozen white male 18 year olds who were determing that this feminist teacher was not going to con them into speaking or writing, let alone workshopping an essay" There is nothing automatic about collaboration in the classroom. Hum Sue Yin points out that students need terms, analytic tools, a specific and engaging object of inquiry, as well as a sense of group identity before group activity becomes something other than a forum for atomistic individuals.

Although I had all of the above in place, I wondered if I wasn't jumping the gun by trying to write about collaboration as I was collaborating. I began to believe that first Devoney and I had to co-author our many discontents and appreciations of feminism in composition. Likewise, I wanted to do more work with Clare on the intersection of gender and Asian identity in student texts. Once you become a collaborative unit- like Gilbert and Gubar, Flower and Hayes, Lunsford and Ede, Belenky et. al., only then can you rewrite earlier work and "let the seams show," while reflecting on the politics of collaborative metaphors- from pajama parties to jazz to babies to a shared woman. Only after extensive

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[1] Getting Smart

collaborating could I begin to draw conclusions about student collaboration. But why was I fantasizing such a linear model of research? Why was I so dependant, even as I questioned the effects of their conclusions, on models like Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose's "Strange Bedfellows: Feminist Collaboration" which narrates a lifetime of collaboration? When we ask our students to reflect on their writing process at the start of a course in composition, they rarely know where to begin, believing that they are not already writers. When a teacher points out that E-Mail, application forms, essay exams, inventory reports, restaurant checks and notes to a roommate are all forms of writing, some become partly convinced. Similarly, to begin my articulation of gender knowledge, I simply needed to recognize the many ways in which I was already collaborating instead of waiting for a magical feminist collaboration to produce a discrete object.

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